

Teacher-Talk: A Sociolinguistic Variable

By Deborah Osborne

Anyone who has ever taught English as a second or foreign language is aware of the immensity of the task. In fact, it is no longer deemed sufficient to teach the nuts and bolts of language—grammatical competence. Also important are sociolinguistic competence, the ability to produce and understand the appropriate remark at the appropriate time; discourse competence, the ability to produce a unified, coherent text in a given genre; and strategic competence, knowledge of how to repair, maintain, enhance, or facilitate communication. The focus of this article is sociolinguistic competence, particularly language variability and how teachers often deal with it.

Linguistic Variables

Every linguist knows that language is changeable and elusive. Not only do languages change over time, but they also vary on the horizontal plane—we all speak differently from one another and to one another. This makes our job as language teachers extraordinarily difficult. We teach our students the "standard" way of saying something, only to be confronted later by perplexed students wondering why native speakers use a different or even aberrant version.

As it happens, we have in linguistics the means to explain this common phenomenon. When a linguistic unit is realised by more than one norm, it is termed a linguistic variable. If its use is sensitive to social context, it is called a sociolinguistic variable.

To further explain a sociolinguistic variable, we will center on one such variable, namely, the form of the English future, "be going to + infinitive." This verb tense has two norms: one, which we shall call the going form, and the second labeled the gonna form. In norm one, we state "The government is going to suspend negotiations...." But in norm two, we might say, "Yeah, Dave's gonna fix that. He said he was gonna do that early next week."

Together, the two norms constitute a linguistic variable. Although basically a syntactic phenomenon, the occurrence of the two norms is sensitive to lexical choice. For instance, norm two is rarely used by educated people in formal settings. We would probably not say "The Australian National Youth Orchestra is gonna perform Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 3 tonight."

From the viewpoint of an ESL teacher, the construction "be going to + infinitive" is significant since it is taught fairly early. As one form of the future in English, it carries a substantial functional load and is commonly used by native speakers. A question arises then as to why so few nonnative speakers seem to have mastered this form. It appears that this problem is related to the difficulty of learning English rhythm and, thus, is a phonological problem. However, there is another possible explanation, one that concerns the way teachers of English address their students.

Teacher-Talk Characteristics

"Teacher-talk" is defined as speech used by teachers that is characteristically modified in four areas: phonology, lexis (consisting of morphology and vocabulary), syntax, and discourse. The phenomenon of teacher-talk has captured the attention of researchers for some time. Numerous studies (Chaudron 1988 cites 21) have been devoted to its description and analysis.

According to some of these studies, the differences in teacher-talk as compared to a typical sociolinguistic domain are not systematic or widespread enough, and they tend to disappear as the class advances. Chaudron (1988) gives some of the typical modifications:

Phonological:

- exaggerated articulation
- extended pauses
- slower rate of speech
- less reduction of vowels and consonant clusters
- louder delivery
- more standard "literary" pronunciation

Lexis:

- more basic vocabulary
- fewer colloquial expressions
- fewer indefinite pronouns
- fewer contractions
- stylistically neutral

Syntactic:

- fewer subordinate clauses
- fewer words per clause
- shorter length of utterance
- higher proportion of simple present tense
- higher proportion of well-formed sentences
- delivery rate one-half to one-third slower

Discourse:

- more first person reference
- fewer functions per time unit
- more teacher-initiated moves
- more conversational frames
- more self-repetitions
- more verbalization per function

To summarize briefly, the speech that teachers use with their students is shorter, simpler, and more carefully pronounced than typical speech.

Rate of Speech

Somewhat surprisingly given the number of studies devoted to the description and analysis of teacher-talk, only two characteristics of this phenomenon have been investigated as to their

efficacy: rate of speech and syntactic complexity. We will restrict ourselves to the former since it is most appropriate to our subject.

Dahl (1981) investigated the relationship between the rate of speech and comprehensibility. The subjects of the study (college students and nonnative speakers of English) were exposed to several messages and asked to rate how understandable these were. All of the subjects judged that the more comprehensible messages were those delivered more slowly. Interestingly enough, however, these judgments did not correlate with the actual measured rate of delivery. Dahl concluded that other factors such as the conciseness of information and the clarity of articulation, which are both linked to the perceived rate of speech, may have played a part in the students' judgments.

Kelch's study (1985) also addressed the question of whether slowing speech enhanced comprehensibility. University students who were nonnative speakers of English were given dictations at varying speeds. It was found that the students performed substantially better when the rate of delivery was slowed from about 200 words per minute (normal speech) to 130 words per minute, which is the average rate of teacher-talk directed toward beginning students.

Blau (1990) carried out two studies. One measured the effect of speed and syntactic complexity on learner comprehension and the other measured the effect of pauses. Contrary to Kelch, she found that slowing the rate of speech and simplifying syntax did not help learner comprehension significantly; however, pausing at constituent boundaries did help.

At this point it is difficult to state with any scientific confidence that speaking more slowly and in simpler sentences actually works. But, scientific claims aside, it is intuitively clear to language teachers that teacher-talk does work, perhaps as a function of all of its characteristics. In fact, it feels necessary, especially with beginning-level students.

Returning to the sociolinguistic variable we were investigating earlier, "be going to + infinitive," we begin to see why so few non-native speakers of English produce the gonna norm of this form. Not only does its use imply close knowledge of phenomena of English pronunciation such as reduction and a mastery of English rhythm, but also that learners are unlikely to hear the reduced form gonna in the English language classroom. When teachers slow their rate of speech and enunciate, gonna is impossible to say.

From the sociolinguistic point of view, teacher-talk, because it is slower and clearer, unwittingly imitates formal English speech. The consequence is that without working on the pronunciation of English (notably the rhythm) and exposure to the more usual pronunciation of variables, learners of English learn and retain a relatively formal and sometimes hypercorrect form of English.

A Practical Solution

We are thus presented with a classic problem. Teacher-talk, used judiciously, seems to be effective, yet it can have lasting undesirable effects on a learner's speech. But there is an easy solution that allows students to hear both norms. First, when presenting the formal form, that is, "be going to + infinitive," begin with careful pronunciation to ensure that students understand the usage and can produce it with some accuracy. Next, expose them aurally to the informal form,

that is, gonna, and explain its uses and constraints. Finally, have the students practice the reduced form, beginning with simple question and answer drills and ending with role-play situations. The latter are invaluable in pointing out such sociolinguistic facts as register variation and politeness formulae.

Conclusion

By exposing students to authentic speech and giving them the opportunity to use it, we accomplish much. Richards (1983) considers both to be essential in developing listening comprehension. If students master the various norms, their speech sounds more English. Perhaps even more significantly, if they manipulate the norms properly, they are, in fact, "acting" more English.

In a linguistic sense, we are also developing their sociolinguistic competence and in a personal, affective sense, we are giving students the opportunity to seek status and/or solidarity much as they do in their own languages (Gee 1988; Labov 1980; Milroy and Milroy 1985). To ignore language variation is to deprive and impoverish our students and ultimately to do a disservice to the language that is in the words of Anthony Burgess, always "gloriously impure."

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